

Healing the HIGH COUNTRY

Forest Service proposes first backcountry camping restrictions in the Selkirks

Story and photographs by Rich Landers, Outdoors editor

SPOKESMAN
REVIEW
4/10/94

Backpackers have been leaving more than footprints and taking more than pictures in the Idaho Selkirk Mountains. They're building fire pits and filling them with trash, trampling the edges of fragile alpine lakes and toppling shoreline trees for firewood. Hikers and horse riders are coming in unprecedented numbers to rugged areas that once provided solitude for a few campers, grizzlies and mountain caribou, the U.S. Forest Service said.

"We've got to face the fact that there simply are too many of us going to some fragile areas," said Pat Hart, a backpacker and trail maintenance director for the Bonners Ferry Ranger District.

On Friday, District Ranger Debbie Henderson-Norton announced proposals for the first restrictions backpackers and horse riders have faced in the Selkirks. The Trout Creek Area Recreation



Pyramid Lake: Easy access has led to abuse that's costly to restore.

Project plan was written following public meetings last year. Public comments will be accepted through May 9. New rules could be in force by summer.

The proposals confront use and abuse of backcountry following the improvements on Trout Creek Road in 1991 to accommodate timber sales. "Getting up the Trout Creek Road used to be a long, bumpy, hour-long ordeal to cover 9 miles," Hart said. "You couldn't be sure of getting up there in a passenger car. Now you can cruise up there in 20 minutes with a horse trailer."

The plan sets standards for use on 56,800 acres, including 10 mountain lakes and some of the highest mountain peaks in Boundary County. It considers the impacts of increased recreation on grizzly bears and mountain caribou, two species being managed under the Endangered Species Act.

However, significant use changes proposed relate only to the damage being done to the ground, Henderson-Norton said. The changes likely to affect most hikers and horsepackers are proposed only for the area around Ball, Pyramid and Trout lakes.

edge to keep people from stepping on every blade of green grass.

Volunteers did similar work at Ball Lakes. Then Hart marched in a downpour with another group to Trout Lake, where they rehabilitated two additional campsites that had been unearthed by campers looking for more space.

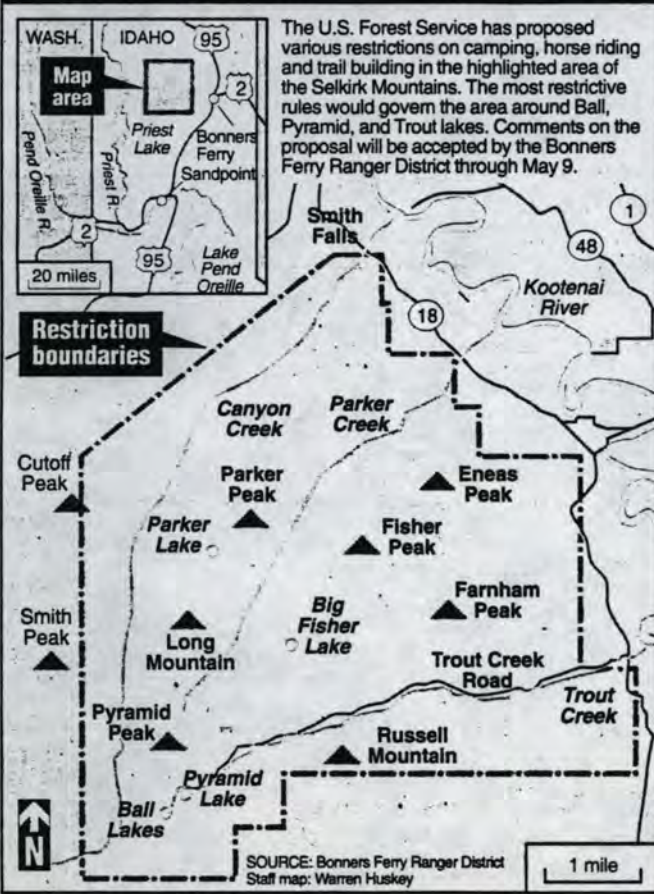
Surveys show that use at Trout Lake in both 1992 and 1993 was more than double what it had been in any previous year, Hart said.

Seven campsites were found at Big Fisher Lake in 1992. Last year, another two campsites were stomped out by campers. Hart found at least 18 fire pits there, up from only six in 1988. Some of the pits were waist-high and within a few feet of each other, she said.

Benches and corrals have been built; discarded equipment, trash and hay bales are common, she said.

"Just before we got to Big Fisher Lake, campers had built lean-tos and covered them with moss they had stripped off the boulders," Hart said. They had cut sub-alpine firs and spruce that had struggled for 60 years to grow 15 feet high in the harsh environment.

Proposed recreational use restrictions



The proposed rules in that area call for:

- Limiting parking at the most popular trailhead for Ball, Pyramid and Trout lakes. Citations would be issued to illegally parked vehicles.
- Restricting overnight groups to no more than 12 persons at the lakes. No more than four special permits would be issued to larger groups during a season.
- Allowing camping only in designated campsites.
- Discouraging campfires at Pyramid and Trout lakes except in emergency situations.
- Prohibiting overnight camping with horses at Ball, Pyramid and Trout lakes.

"We explored the option of a permit system, but it's expensive to administer and unpopular with locals who are used to going to the mountains on a whim when the weather is good," Henderson-Norton said.

"We also considered putting a gate on Trout Creek Road and forcing people to walk into the area, but we don't feel that is necessary at this time," she said. "If we can work with folks and educate them on low-impact camping, it won't matter how many people use the area."

"The way it is now," she added, "the Selkirks are being loved to death."

Last summer, Hart organized volunteer work groups to restore 7,000 square feet of trampled ground at one site along Pyramid Lake. They tried to establish a main trail to campsites to minimize impacts. They put rocks along the lake

will last at least half a century.

The two different groups led by Hart last summer worked 18 days in the Trout Creek area and packed out at least 500 pounds of garbage.

"The negative impacts used to be confined to Pyramid Lake," Hart said. "At one time, we counted three or four groups of 12 to 18 people camping there at one time. But now the abuse is spreading farther."

"It's no longer the accomplished backpacker that's using these lakes. Less savvy people are coming. People who read the old version of the Boy Scout manual and are still cutting down trees to build lean-tos."

"We're trying to preserve a quality backcountry experience and still allow traditional use," Henderson-Norton said.

At Roman Nose Lakes, for instance, the road will be blocked 500 feet from the lake shore this year. New rules prohibit camping outside of designated sites.

"Roman Nose is the only alpine lake in the Selkirks that gramma and grampa can drive to," Hart said. "We want to preserve that traditional use, but we have to draw a line somewhere. Right now it's just a free-for-all."

Hart called the Trout Creek proposals "an experiment" to see if further restrictions can be avoided.

"We hope people will take some pride and ownership in the Selkirks," she said.